

Illinois Fourth Graders Learn to be Safe Bike Drivers League of Illinois Bicyclists Uses Safe Routes to School Grant to Distribute Safety Sheet

More than 200,000 children, and their families, are more knowledgeable about bike safety and biking safer thanks to a Safe Routes to School grant distributed by the Illinois Department of Transportation to LIB.

At the end of April 2010, more than 214,000 copies of our “Be a Safe Bike Driver” sheet were sent to a total of more than 2,900 private and public schools in Illinois. The bicycle safety education sheets were distributed to each fourth grade class. Information on bike safety geared towards older children was listed on the front such as “Obey traffic laws” and “Ride on the right side of the road or trail.”

The sheet was titled “Be a Safe Bike Driver” to emphasize that the children are not just playing with a toy but “driving” their bicycles. On the back of the sheet is information geared towards parents with information on bike safety as well as common causes of car/bike collisions and information on why children, as they mature, become safer when they ride in the street as opposed to on the sidewalks. Copies of the sheets, as well as a sheet geared towards younger children, are available on LIB’s website at <http://www.bikelib.org/safety-education/kids/bike-safety-sheet/>.

A dozen schools took the time to also administer a pretest to assess what students already know about bicycle safety and conducted a post test to help LIB determine the “Be a Safe Bike Driver” effectiveness of the sheets. More than 700 students did the pre and post tests which will greatly help us determine what they are learning from the sheets as well as how the sheets and tests might be improved. Finding the pilot schools proved to be one of the more difficult parts of the program. LIB project assistant Gina Kenny contacted schools in each IDOT district by phone and email and enlisted the help of LIB board members throughout the state to try to find schools willing to participate during a particularly busy time of the school year.

One of the ways we already have learned the sheets could be improved is by having a Spanish version of the sheets. Several schools contacted us after the sheets were distributed asking for a Spanish version. LIB sought volunteers through the Illinois SRTS State Network and Active Transportation Alliance as well as posting the request in our quarterly newsletter, on our webpage and on our Facebook page. A volunteer responded to our post on Facebook to translate the sheet. The cover letter for our next distribution will note that a Spanish version is available on our website as well as a PDF for schools to place in “virtual backpacks.”

The results from the tests are extremely encouraging. First, children in Illinois are already somewhat knowledgeable about bicycle safety by the time they are ending fourth grade (ages 8-9). Overall, 72 percent of the seven questions were answered correctly. After reviewing the “Be a Safe Bike Driver” sheet, there was an increase to 83 percent for the correctly answered questions, with three of the schools having 90 percent or better and a total of five schools scoring at least 85 percent or higher.

Nearly all students know, after reviewing the sheet, how to wear a helmet correctly. Ninety-two percent indicated correctly which illustration showed the child wearing a helmet that protects their head the best. Knowing how to wear a helmet correctly is vitally important as 85 percent of bicycling fatalities are due to head injuries. A question asking how many fingers a person should be able to fit between his helmet strap and skin had the biggest increase in correct answers from the pretest and post tests. Thirty-three percent of students still marked the incorrect answer after reviewing the safety sheet. However, out of the 262 incorrect responses, only 23 were that the strap does not need to be fastened meaning that most students had issues with how tightly the strap should be.

A whopping 93 percent of students, after reviewing the sheet, know that bicycles need to obey stop signs and red lights. Bicyclists failing to stop at a stop sign or signal cause about 8 percent of car/bike collisions, according to educational materials from the League of American Bicyclists.

The second largest increase of comprehension was dealing with which direction bicycles should ride in the street. There was an increase of 16 percent of correct answers from before they reviewed the sheet and after the sheet was reviewed. Unfortunately, only 64 percent of the children realized that bikes should ride on the right side of the street in the same direction as cars. A bicyclist riding on the wrong side of the street is the biggest cause of car/bike collisions and, even after reviewing the sheet, 18 percent of students indicated that is the side of the street bikes should ride on. Ten percent of students taking the post tests said bikes are not allowed to ride in the street, even if a parent says the child is old enough. We have revised the “Be a Safe Driver” sheet to include information on why it is important to ride on the right side of the road to address this issue.

An article was written on the program for LIB’s summer quarterly newsletter and LIB was able to have the daily newspaper SouthtownStar run a version of the article in the paper’s Oak Forest edition, which is the town of one of the schools that participated in the testing.

At a back to school event in Oak Forest in August 2010, LIB had a table and Kenny spoke to some of the Girl Scouts that were doing face painting. A girl from Oak Forest and a girl from Country Club Hills both spoke of receiving the sheet in school. LIB was able to secure the endorsement from the Illinois Principals Association and the Illinois Association of School Administrators. IPA and IASA allowed LIB to use their logos on the envelopes and cover letters for the distribution. Their logos and endorsements show that they support bicycle safety and education children on the topic and also helped to ensure that busy school administrators took the time to review and distribute the materials instead of putting them in the recycling bin. After receiving input from school officials, LIB will be distributing the “Be a Safe Bike Driver” sheets in the fall of the 2010-2011 school year, when there is more time in teachers’ schedules to go over the sheets with the students.